

Resettlement and Restless Tree Spirits: Shifting Identities and Resource-based Livelihoods in North Halmahera

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1 The Trouble with Spirits

A small yet significant event occurred in July 1996 in a transmigration site while I was completing fieldwork in the western part of the sub-district of Kao, north Halmahera. It was an event whose various meanings appear to embody the struggles of local people over natural resource access and local livelihoods, and the cultural meanings attached to changing forest resources, identity and modern life precipitated by transmigration.¹ A small group of Modole speaking transmigrants had gone to a largely open field, which had earlier been cleared by the contractor's bulldozer when Tolabit forest land had become the transmigration site. Their plan was to cut down the remaining large lone banyan tree (a variety of *Ficus* or *beringin* in Indonesian language) left by the bulldozers in order to construct a paddy field in preparation for planting rice. However, as the tree was cut down it twisted as it fell, killing one man and cutting the leg off another man who was the village *pendeta* (Christian minister). Local people were stunned and dismayed over what happened, not only by the death of the young man and serious injury to a prominent community member, but because felling the tree had been part of a plan, heavily promoted by Transmigration officials and taken up by Modole leaders, to encourage the local Modole transmigrants to modernize their agricultural activities by planting *sawah* (irrigated rice).

This event was remarkable for the unease it generated in the Tolabit Modole transmigrant community, a small community within the much

¹I use the word local throughout to indicate people whose ancestors were local to the area for generations. Local is contrasted with those who have recently arrived through the government initiated transmigration programme.

larger Javanese transmigrant settlement,² and for the levels of discussion and disagreements over the meaning of what happened. Banyan trees are well known among the Modole to be the home of forest spirits, an understanding based in local culture which appears to coexist with their firm beliefs in Christianity (Heuting, 1922 and 1928, Haire 1981, Koagouw, 1983). The massive destruction of the forest in the opening of the transmigration site also seems to sit uneasily with the local desire for modern access to transport, roads, bridges and clean water brought by transmigration and the promise of electricity and secondary schools (Leith 1997). For the Modole, as swidden agriculturalists, participation in resettlement and irrigated rice cultivation has meant their incorporation into the nation state's realm of acceptable (agri)culture. This article is an attempt to link local symbolism and the unease of local beliefs in the face of modernity, with the larger state initiated changes in landscape and resource-based livelihood practice, which as been brought by transmigration.

2 Transmigration at Kao

In 1982, 14 years before the accident, a reconnaissance survey of 38,846 ha in *kecamatan*³ Kao was completed by consultants for the Department of Transmigration to assess the potential for transmigration sites in the area. Of the total surveyed, 7000 ha was identified in the study as suitable for transmigration. This area included 22 entire villages out of the 38 villages in Kao, with a total population of 7,384, or roughly an area with two-thirds of the existing *kecamatan* population (approximately 11,000 people, 1980). The study however, recommended that Kao be rejected for transmigration settlement for the following reasons:

- virtually all suitable land was claimed by the local population on the basis of *adat* (traditional) law⁴

²In the resettlement site, out of a total 550 households, there are only 82 households of Modole local transmigrants: 66 households of Tolabit, and 16 households of Torawat (1995). The rest of the transmigrants are from Java.

³an administrative sub-district

⁴As part of the Terms of Reference it is recommended that not more than 15% of land for transmigration be used intensively or occupied by local people.

- in the eastern area, domestic water supply was a major limiting factor during the hot season
- the total suitable area (including land originally outside the survey for transmigration) was only 7000 ha (DHV 1982).

Against consultants' advice, seven transmigration sites were planned; six were eventually built and the final seventh was in process for completion early in the new century. In all, more than 15,000 ha of land in the sub-district was finally allocated to transmigration (P.T. Widuri Utama Timberindo 1994:111–1), representing almost 20% of the total land area of Kao sub-district.⁵

The first two transmigration sites were cleared and opened in the sub-district of Kao between 1984 and 1987, at Biang (now called Waringin Lamo) in the dryer Boeing area north west of Kao, and also in western Kao at Toliwang, near the confluence of the three river branches which feed the Kao River. Between 1991 and 1994 four more sites were cleared and opened upriver in the Modole swampland area. The four new transmigration sites were established in the traditional lands of Soasangaji and Tolabit/Torawat villages and included lands expropriated from Lelessing and Soahukum villages.⁶

3 Village History

Many Tolabit villagers talk about the move into the transmigration programme as a positive event, an opportunity, to “wake up” their community and take on the activities and benefits of modern life which they recognize are theirs by right as citizens of Indonesia. Moving the village

⁵In 1981 with the licensing of forestry concessions in Kao, surveys were undertaken by central government and land use allocated. Transmigration was allocated 15,000 ha in the land use plans, which represents more than 20% of *kecamatan* land area.

⁶Not surprisingly, the population of Kao sub-district dramatically increased more than 100% during the period which corresponded to opening transmigration sites 1980–1994, from a base line of 9,193 in 1971, and more than 11,000 (1980) to 22,569 in 1994 (Maluku Dalam Angka). This may be compared with Maluku as a whole, where in the years between 1980 and 1985, transmigration accounted for a 17% increase in the provincial population (see Bubandt 1996).

and living with other communities yet keeping their gardens and their own community culture has been a pattern over the last century.

Village history suggests that Tolabit had its origins with four *margas* (clans), descendants of one Modole ancestor, living in the area to the west of the river Tolabit. They moved regularly within a limited area near the river, shifting according to the activities in their forest swidden gardens, processing sago and engaging in other hunting and food gathering activities further afield. Tolabit history after the turn of the century was also linked with the neighbouring settlement of Torawat, which began as the home of newcomers who wandered into their area from places such as Tuguis, Payahe, and Patani in Halmahera, and from as far away as Sulawesi and Surabaya. With the village conversions to Christianity in 1917, the two villages became more closely associated by sharing a church and a single congregation. Torawat, which had been located above Tolabit, moved its settlement nearby. This association continued until the arrival of the Japanese during the Second World War in 1942, when the villages dispersed to safety deeper into the forest. After the Japanese defeat at the end of 1944, the villagers returned once again to rebuild their village. For less than a decade and a half before the Permesta rebellions of 1958–1961, the villagers lived together but retained separate identities as Tolabit and Torawat. During the Permesta rebellions the villagers again fled to the safety of the forest, later moving to Kao on the coast for the duration of the rebellion after a year in the forest. After Permesta, the united village taking the name Tolabit, returned to the Tolabit river area, to land which had during the early part of the century been allocated to the various *margas* of both villages and passed on to further generations as inheritance. In 1971 the united village of Tolabit moved again, this time to nearby Lelessing, a village of Pagu speakers, to benefit from the establishment of a school. Village land was given for Tolabit use by Lelessing village, but not for permanent ownership. The Tolabit and Torawat villagers continued to retain their ancestral forest and garden areas for swidden cultivation, and expanded their coconut and cacao gardens.⁷

⁷The whole Modole population in a number of villages in western Kao was estimated at over 2000 people at the turn of the century in 1900 (van Frassen, 1980). By 1979 Modole population had declined to 1767 in 756 households, including 24 households in Tolabit (Koagouw 1983). The most recent estimates of population in Modole communities

Tolabit has always retained a strong sense of community and a reputation for being forward looking, valuing education and leadership.⁸ After planning began between the *kecamatan* and the Department of Transmigration for a transmigration site in their area, several thousand hectares of Modole land was to be expropriated.⁹ The Tolabit villagers decided after a series of village meetings to move into the transmigration site, (unlike Lelessing) in order to retain some control over their ancestral lands. Though originally planned by Transmigration as a dispersal of the Tolabit community into the largely Javanese settlement, the Tolabit community moved in early to occupy houses in one area of the transmigration site as an entire community the week before the arrival of the Javanese, (with the Torawat settling in another part of the transmigration site), too late for the transmigration officials to do anything about it. This story was retold to me many times as an example of Tolabit leadership and the ways in which they hoodwinked the Department of Transmigration. Unusually, rather than dispersal, they continued to retain their status as a *desa definitif*, a legally constituted village, with all the benefits (such as IDT funds¹⁰) and the responsibilities of a village, rather than have their status and identity disappear into the largely Javanese transmigration site.

4 Local Interpretations of the Accident

Early reaction to the forest accident appears to fall into two perspectives. One perspective interprets the accident as revealing strong underlying conflicts about rice and resettlement on the one hand, and the destruction of forest-based livelihoods on the other. Citing the ecological logic of the event, these people see the accident as the ancestors' warning against the

suggest there are 2321 in eight communities, excluding Modole in mixed communities in the sub-district who claim Modole ethnicity. The population of Tolabit is 250 people, and Torawat 60 people (1995).

⁸Tolabit has also prided itself as a strong centre of Christianity. It was at Tolabit during the early days of World War II that church leaders from throughout northeast Halmahera met and first planned the independent Halmahera church which evolved after the end of the into Gereja Masehi Injili Halmahera (GIMH).

⁹More than 15,000 ha of land has been claimed by the Department of Transmigration and Forest Dwellers for transmigration sites throughout *kecamatan* Kao.

¹⁰Impres Desa Tertinggal—special development funds given only to the poorest villages throughout Indonesia

undesirable shift in agricultural development to irrigated rice at the expense of the forest. The second perspective reflects anxiety over cultural change, concerned with what the accident reveals about conflicts between Christian values and traditional forms of cultural respect towards forest resources. Some people think that the group of tree cutters ignored or were insensitive to the forest spirits, and didn't pray to the spirits first. Others think that the spirits are too strong and the cutters didn't try hard enough to placate them. Virtually no-one is satisfied with the technical explanation of simply poor cutting. An old banyan's massive trunk is never a single trunk, but is instead a collection of buttressing trunks which were its former aerial roots. Its surface roots spread out in every direction, and its branches form a curtain of aerial strands which descend to the ground. An umbrella canopy of leaves covers the massive structure. The difficulty of safely cutting the multiple roots and trunk of the banyan tree with the possible unanticipated shifts as the tree falls, however, was rarely an acceptable explanation of what happened.

These interpretations reflect socially differentiated sets of cultural meanings attached to livelihoods, forests, forest spirits and the accident, and they expose the current heterogeneity of community identity as Modole swidden agriculturalists. Both perspectives reveal degrees of conflicts over identity and modernity, involving varying commitments to resettlement, modern livelihoods and relations with the state, as well as shifting identities as both Christians and Modole within a national, state sponsored environment.¹¹

5 Modole Village and Tree Spirits

Despite fervent beliefs in Christianity, traditional pre-literary beliefs are retained to varying degrees by Modole villagers, who are unwilling to

¹¹Michael Taussig (1980:17) suggests that we shouldn't get too complicated in reading into events, arguing that analysis should be as literal and non-reductionist as possible. Echoed by Fairhead and Leach (1998:254) these writers provide useful cautions about the danger of imputing excess symbolic association with issues concerning trees. My approach here, like Taussig and Fairhead and Leach is to emphasize what the villagers have to say, and examine what the local discourses can tell use about conflicts over access and control of resources and the role of the state in forcing changes in landscape, resources and livelihood practices.

divest themselves of their contact with ancestors and the spirit world.¹² Those who believe that the accident was caused by the spirit world point out the various spirits who may be responsible. The *kepala desa*, who coincidentally is a church elder, outlined to me the various relevant spirits or *suangi* which are described below.

In Modole beliefs, the *gomanga*—the spirit of the living dead, believed to be a relative or ancestor—has the power to protect relatives from all troubles and accidents and to enable success in daily activities. The *gomanga* also has the power to become a dangerous enemy if funeral rites are ignored or not well done, and can bring disaster, especially to their immediate family. When the protective work of the *gomanga* is completed, it may then drift from the village into its own world. Thus the *gomanga maowa*—(good spirits) and *gomanga madisa* (bad spirits), are shaped by the family themselves. Did the injured man and the one who was killed have lingering problems with their *gomanga*?

The world of the village spirits was originally associated with the forest. The *meki*, chief of all village spirits, is an ancestral ghost, a hairy giant, with big eyes (looking rather like the Javanese *gendruwo* spirit described by Wiselius (1872:26), though less benign). This is a localized spirit who is thought of as bringing misfortune, who can take a person's soul and transform him, eventually destroying him.

Another village spirit related to swidden activities, called *ibilisi* (Modole) or *ibilihi* (Tobelo), is the spirit of the unopened forest, who demands respect from those who clear the forest for agricultural purposes. This spirit seeks retribution from those who have caused it trouble. If a tree is cut down without the support of the *ibilisi* then it is as if the tree has fallen on the *ibilisi* itself. The villager involved will be forced by the spirit to suffer equally by being partially injured in the forest clearing. In the Tolabit accident, the person who was injured and lost his leg when the tree fell on him was the local *pendeta* and village leader, suggesting possible conflicts over Modole spirit and Christian values.

The spirit connected specifically to the banyan tree, the *babasarama* (Modole) or *bubaharama* (Tobelo) is the spirit of the strength of the land.

¹²James Haire (1981) provides considerable detail about traditional north Halmahera spirit beliefs such as those of the Galela, Sahu and Tobelo, but does not describe specific Modole beliefs.

These spirits live in banyan trees and must be honored to prevent disaster. Villagers may fell the banyan tree at their peril only after careful ritual preparation and persuading the ancestors and spirits to move to trees elsewhere.¹³ More drastic approaches reportedly may be taken to safely cut the tree down using rituals with salt or mirrors which will scare the spirit when it looks upon itself, causing it to flee.

6 Symbolic Roles played by the Banyan Tree

Though several different spirits may be responsible for the accident, the significance of the banyan tree and the *babasarama* spirit representing the strength of the land is not lost on the villagers. Not only in Halmahera but throughout Indonesia, the banyan tree (and the many varieties of the *Ficus* species) is revered. In Java the banyan, (called *waringin* bahasa Java) also has ritual functions and is a sacred place of offerings (Kruyt 1906, Boomgaard 1995). Like Java, the banyan tree in island Nusa Penida, between Bali and Lombok is endowed with spiritual strength, a focal point representing the community and village life as a whole, an object of rituals made on behalf of the whole village (Giambelli 1998). The varieties of *Ficus* of India (*Ficus religiosa* called bodhi and *Ficus benghalensis* called banyan) are revered as well (Boomgaard 1995).

It was tempting as an observer to draw attention to the significance of the banyan tree as a prominent Indonesian national symbol, certainly in the context of the nationalist project of transmigration. The banyan tree was one of the five emblems of the Indonesia Pancasila icon, symbolizing national unity under the slogan *Persatuan Indonesia* (one united Indonesia) during the New Order Period when the accident occurred. It was also the symbol of Golkar, then the ruling political party. However, this modernist symbol of the Indonesian state was not perceived by the villagers to be potent, and they ignored its political significance in favour of the more pressing cultural symbolism of Modole spirits and their forest trees.

¹³Heuting, a Dutch missionary in Tobelo at the turn of the century, reported a setback in evangelization at Tolonoeo in Tobelo, after the sudden death of an evangelist's child. The evangelist had cut down a tree associated with the *bubaharama* spirit. The spirits of the pre-Christian world were clearly stronger than the spirits of Christianity and not to be ignored (Heuting 1922:214–236).

7 Resettlement and Changing Resource-based Livelihoods

With the expropriation of Modole land for the establishment of this transmigration site in western Kao, numerous changes have occurred to the landscape, the resource base and the economy of Tolabit and other villages around the transmigration site.¹⁴ The felling of the banyan tree which led to the accident continued a pattern of the removal of trees and the elimination of forest resources to make way for more people and other livelihood activities.

The transmigration site occupies a lowland area which had originally been virgin forest, coconut and cacao gardens, swiddens and sago swamp-land, all used for livelihood activities of local people. The forest was cleared by chainsaws, with the contractors employing many of the local people to assist in opening the forest.¹⁵ Bulldozers flattened the contours, drainage and irrigation was installed and the river course rerouted around the transmigration site. A new access road and bridges were built, linking this area for the first time with the coast, 60 km away. Many coconut and cacao gardens were destroyed by the bulldozers, and the contractors offered insignificant compensation for their loss. These contractors offered no compensation for the sago trees, despite their commercial value to the sago flour factory downstream, and their use value as a primary food source.

The huge gaps in the natural tree cover of the rainforest have created soil erosion problems. Downstream there has been flooding at another transmigration site because of the increased volume of river flow. There has been pressure on wildlife as habitat has disappeared, and villagers now make longer journeys much further afield to hunt for both food sources such as deer (*Cervus timorensis*), wild pigs (*sus scrofa*), civets (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*) and lizards (known locally as *soasoa*), and commercially valuable bird species such as lories (*lorius garrulus*), cockatoos (*Cacatua alba*) and parrots (*alisterus amboinesnsis*) (see also Bird Life International 1995:49).

¹⁴The observations reported here are based on Ph.D. research undertaken in 1989, 1991, and 1995–96 (Leith 2001).

¹⁵Resettlement has been implicated as one of the largest contributors to massive forest destruction in Indonesia. Estimates of deforestation due to resettlement throughout Indonesia range from a high of 300,000 ha per year to lows of 65,000 to 80,000 ha. (World Bank 1994:52)

Swidden cultivation has been intensified, with shorter fallow rotation.¹⁶ New land is being opened further from the older fields. The decline in sago as a food source is significant, and can be linked to decreased access to sago forests through transmigration, the success of the “agroecological myth of the superiority of rice” (Dove 1988), and the establishment of the sago flour factory which encouraged sago cutting for the factory (Leith 1992).¹⁷

Because of resettlement, the resulting deforestation has led to other changes in local livelihood practices. With diminished numbers of large tree species for the local collection of cash generating non-timber forest products such as durian (*Durio zibethinus*), candlenut (*Canarium indicum*), rattan (*Calamus*), sago (*Metroxylon*), damar and copal (*Agathis* sp) and various bamboo species, villagers from Tolabit and other villages around the transmigration site have had to look for other income sources. Transmigration has indeed led to a modernization of the economy, and greater opportunity for and reliance on both wage labour and alternative sources of cash earnings. With the arrival of chainsaws, young people would rather work for wages using new technology than depend on the declining forest resources for food. Expanded resource-based income opportunities from resettlement have included a demand for sago leaf roofing material for transmigrant sheds and kitchens, and an increased demand for bamboo for building materials. The greater reliance on cash and improved road links has meant increases in purchases of food such as fish from mobile Javanese motorcycle-based sellers, packaged foods such as instant noodles, and increased rice consumption.

8 Rice Cultivation and Resettlement

The accident took place in the context of opening an area for planting irrigated rice, an activity which was influenced by the received wisdom from the centre on the role of transmigration in civilizing and modern-

¹⁶Upland rice is planted as part of the swidden agricultural cycle after burning and opening a forest patch, followed by bananas, cassava, maize. Though bananas appear to be the primary starchy food source, there is increasing reliance on cassava. After its uses as a swidden, coconut and cacao are planted as permanent tree crops.

¹⁷At least for a few years at least until its damage in the earthquake of 1994.

izing local people on the periphery.¹⁸ Planting *sawah* is an important step along the road to national citizenship (Rijksen and Persoon, 1991; Persoon 1992; Leith 2001).

Transmigration has an explicit cultural commitment to integrate the marginal people on the periphery into national life (Leith 1998). I often heard comments by transmigration and other government officials indicating that the “lazy aimless life” associated with shifting cultivation and sago could be modified by transmigration to a more disciplined orderly life of intensive irrigated rice cultivation and settlement alongside the Javanese, who could teach the locals the benefits of a Javanese-style modern intensive agricultural life.¹⁹

Though not the first *sawah* to be made by the Tolabit transmigrants, the enterprise is generally resisted, and Modole usually say they are not “able” to do it. Given time, labour requirements and the degree of risk involved, intensive agriculture and irrigated rice is not particularly compatible with the Modole extensive agricultural systems. There are also ongoing complaints of “yellow leaf” problems in rice cultivation at nearby Toliwang from Javanese farmers in the transmigration site there, as well as complaints about soil unsuitability in the former swampland, with underlying layers of peat and undecomposed leaf matter.

9 Conclusion

The accident at Tolabit has given voice to the uncertainty villagers are experiencing over the various changes accompanying their incorporation as transmigrants in the new settlement. The kinds of discussions which

¹⁸A particular telling example of this is a statement made in 1996 by the Minister of Transmigration, Siswono Yudohusodo concerning the purposes of transmigration, “... that it [transmigration] is an effort to bring the largely backward island [referring to Siberut] into the modern civilization fold.” He went on to say that “Siberut was even more backward than most areas of eastern Indonesia whose inhabitants were still living very much in a by-gone era. Obviously we cannot leave them in that state.” (*Jakarta Post* Feb. 14, 1996: 2). See also Colchester, 1986.

¹⁹New transmigration projects are moving away from farm models based on rice cultivation to tree crops and industrial plantations (*hutan tanaman industri*) and as well fisheries in Kalimantan and Maluku, suggesting a more careful look at the environmental suitability of the agricultural activities. However, the transmigration objective of improving economic productivity of local people continues (see Goss, 1992).

have accompanied the reaction to the accident are not simply an effect of the state and state initiated change on the local, but are products of the conflicts of the convergence of the two life and livelihood systems. There is both an acceptance of resettlement and all that it implies including willingness to adapt agricultural practices such as planting irrigated rice, and an awareness that the acceptance of change raises dilemmas of how to merge the forest life and some of the essence of their past with the present incorporation into national Indonesia life.

While Boomgaard (1995), writing about sacred trees in Java, speculates that people who witness the retreat of the forest will be less inclined to cling to beliefs that appear to be obviously no longer directly applicable, the example here suggests that with the retreating forest they must instead take their own beliefs much more seriously. The accident appears to be a powerful statement of opposition by the ancestors, a warning by the forest spirits about the need for maintaining continuity of the social order in the linkage with the Javanized Indonesia nation. Many Tolabit villagers want to ensure that the forest is not subsumed to paddy field, and that Modole beliefs and lifestyle are not sacrificed to the lure of modernity which is part of national citizenship. How Tolabit people will come to retell this story and problematize the conflicts in modernity, identity and livelihoods in the future will be important to follow.

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